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# Start where **they** find themselves

George Boran CSSp



**W**hen we talk of education we tend to think of the formal education that takes place in schools. Spiritans in Latin America do not have their own schools, so we tend to use a non-formal approach: celebrations, groups, formation of leaders. We start with people's lives, where people find themselves.

The story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus depicts how Jesus uses this method. He does not start by giving them a lecture. Rather, he starts patiently with their situation of discouragement and disillusionment to awaken them to faith in the resurrection. It was

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only at the end of the journey that his listeners recognized him — in the breaking of the bread.

Many priests, sisters and laypeople have been trained to work in a formal educational setting and have difficulty adapting to the new rules of a non-formal situation. They are competent when it comes to giving a talk, a class — organizing from the top down. But in pastoral ministry they have difficulty understanding that the rules, the attitudes, and the methods have to be different.

In a school the teacher can count on the continuous presence of her pupils. Even if she is a bad teacher, pupils continue to attend because

they need to get a diploma at the end of the course. Without a diploma they won't be able to get a job. Without a job they won't be able to eat, marry, buy a house and raise a family.

In a non-formal education context, on the other hand, the motivation is different. The leader does not have a captive audience. He/she must motivate people to come to the first meeting. Then they must be motivated to return to the next one. And so on for every meeting. If meetings become tiring, repetitive and mediocre people tend to opt out. To be successful, non-formal education needs a high capacity of adaptation and creativity: adapt and respond to people's needs and so motivate them — or close down.

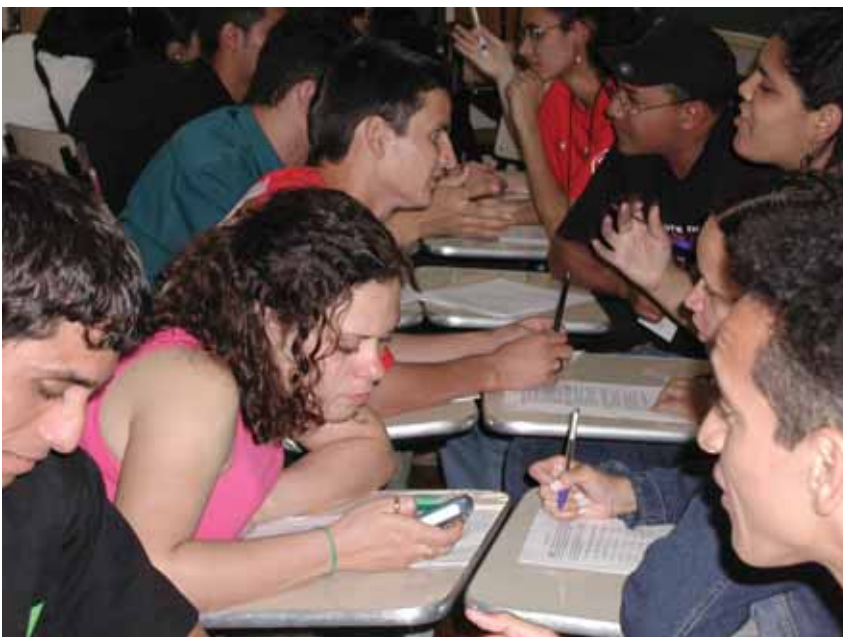
Unfortunately, many church leaders have been trained for talking at people and have difficulty knowing what to do when they don't have a captive audience.

Young people are an important "field of mission" today. The threatening collapse of the church and religious congregations in some developed countries, provoked by the exodus of youth from the church, is a stark reminder of the importance of these young people of God.

In developing countries they are one of the principal victims of unjust social structures: unemployment, lack of housing, poor quality education in public schools, violence, drugs and dysfunctional families. But young people are also a potential for renewal and transformation of the church and society.

## Education and culture

Understanding a challenge is always the first step to finding a solution. Diagnosis precedes cure. Mission to young people does not operate in a vacuum, but in the context of their



## Discovering their talents

Young people in youth groups find the non-formal methodology very attractive and successful. Participants learn by doing. They discover their talents, their capacity to communicate with others, their ability to think for themselves. This contrasts with much of the methodology in the Church of talking at people and treating them as passive audiences. Variety and learning in a fun way result in a strong spirit of friendship and bonding.

The programme or course can be easily reproduced to impact on more people — this is one of the most important aspects of the course. Those invited back to give the courses to others undergo a second and more profound level of formation. We use an important educational principle: "The best way to learn something is to be obliged to teach it to others."

An important motivational factor is the priority we give to human formation as a channel of freedom from poverty and ignorance. These two conditions enslave many and facilitate their being manipulated by the powerful.

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surrounding culture. Modern and post-modern cultures increasingly shape the values of today's young people. Understanding these cultures is the key to understanding young people and helping them on the road to Christian commitment.

This cultural understanding requires a different type of faith. It means a transition from a cultural Christianity to a Christianity of personal faith. Faith can no longer be reduced to Sunday Mass, to a list of dogmas, to a moral code or to social problems. It must be something richer and more challenging. Faith is especially an encounter with the person of Jesus. And an acceptance of Jesus means also an acceptance of his teaching, his life style, his world vision and his formula for human happiness.

## Start with their interests

Informal education requires us to start where people are. We need to start with basic human needs: happiness, the need to love and be loved, to be recognized, the need for material security, for identity, for emotional fulfillment in interpersonal relationships, to be kind and receive kindness, to give meaning to one's life, to transcend oneself, to be part of a human group and to count on it for dealing with life's challenges and with building a better world. If we don't start with their interests, we can't hold their interest.

Education should take into account that growth is gradual: political and social awareness involves work in groups stage by stage.

Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, points out that people on the margin of society tend to have a magical view of the world. They believe that the solutions to social problems must come from divine intervention or by waiting passively for those in power to have pity on them. They see the solution to social problems as favours rather than rights. They assimilate the opinion the elite classes have of them that they have no value and are to blame for their situation. They become resigned to their lot in society.

The transition from the awareness of being a serf in a medieval organized society to that of being a citizen in a modern democracy and the awareness that all power comes from the people and not the elected officials and the elite classes are important steps in this process. A strong civil society will demand accountability of its elected officials.

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Today the internet can be an important ally. Young people are connected on a continuous basis through it and their mobile phones. They discuss issues and pass on texts and so create awareness.

### Our model of church

We are not just social workers or non-governmental organizations. We have a mission that we received from Jesus Christ. We should aim for quality and excellence in education while also passing on a value system. Otherwise we can be educating cleverer exploiters of their own people. Through words and actions the church proclaims Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life.

The model of church we present is of fundamental importance for the credibility of the message we hope to transmit. During the period of authoritarian and military governments the Church placed its moral force on the side of the marginalized and became the voice of those without a voice. However, there is a tendency today to retreat and strengthen a more clerical, bureaucratic and less prophetic church. This tendency can lead to a loss of credibility especially among young people.

The vocations that are being attracted to our seminaries and convents are not always the most idealistic and dynamic, capable of dialoguing with a new world which is being born. Sometimes we find a certain fundamentalism which makes dialogue difficult.

The commitment to education should help to make the shift from a purely cultic and sacramental church to one

which also includes skills for moving out of the sacristy to evangelize young people in their modern and postmodern cultural setting. Education has a key role to play in this.

### Leadership plus enthusiasm

Leadership skills do not work without a strong enthusiastic belief in the message to be transmitted. One person remarked, "You need to believe, to be enthusiastic, and to be passionate about the message you have to transmit." The word gospel means good news. Good news cannot be communicated in a dispirited way. A salesman trying to sell something that he has absolutely no faith in is very relevant here. The message we have to transmit was never more relevant.

Work with young people is not for the weak-hearted. One must be prepared to take risks, but risks that involve careful



preparation and planning. This is the most difficult, the most challenging and the most rewarding mission "territory" that exists today. Here will be fought the battle that will determine the survival or not of many religious congregations and, to some extent, of the institutional church itself.

### Two fronts at the same time

The emotional impact of large rallies cannot replace the slow process of evangelization that respects different stages and involves systematic accompaniment of persons and groups. Mass rallies have their place, but on their own they are not the solution.

It is more difficult for the church to work with people who are critical and have a higher educational level. But if we lose young people, we lose the future.

There are several signs of hope. In many countries the Church is making work with youth a priority. Perhaps the church of the future will have less people. But it is important that it be the yeast in the dough that evangelizes, not from a position of power, but through the witness and the dynamism of its members, especially its young people. When we are weak we become strong. ■

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